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## **Environment and Planning D: society and space**

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### **Assemblage, transversality and participation in the neoliberal university**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper develops a novel approach to what we call 'participation as assemblage' by drawing upon Felix Guattari's foundational work on assemblage theory. We develop and ground our concerns by taking the reader through the details of a participatory development case study that we have been involved in from the Caribbean since the 1990s. Through unfolding this long story, we explain how we have historically engaged different participatory literatures and today find Guattari's work on transversality and ethico-aesthetics salient as a way into thinking through our central interest in participation as assemblage. Here both our case study and Guattari's originating work on assemblage are further grounded by working through some salient relationships between experimental approaches to participatory development and the contemporary neoliberal university.

#### **Keywords**

Participation, assemblage, Guattari, transversality, ethico-aesthetics, neoliberal university

#### **Experimental participation**

The history of participatory development is far from straightforward and cannot be retold through a single historical narrative. But one recurrent concern does seem to arise for many: just how

experimental can participation actually be given the strictures of institutional practices; and, in particular, how can we produce novel theory and practice given the often constraining structures of international development, university, funding metrics, and others (Askins and Pain, 2011; Kesby, 2007; Kindon et al., 2007; Kinpaisby, 2008). To this end, a raft of critical papers have, for example, emphasized the inabilities of participatory approaches to challenge institutional donor power relations (Cooke and Kothari, 2001); how participation reduces development to therapeutic intervention but often maintains wider social inequalities (Williams, 2004), or reflects the collapse of meaningful radical politics (Chandler, 2014). Some critiques have gone further and foregrounded the 'dark side' of participatory development; constituting it as an oppressive governmental rationality where empowerment, consensus-building and stakeholder management often makes life worse for the disenfranchised (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Yiftachel, 1998). But equally, this diversity of debate also recurrently brings out more experimental approaches that play with this darker side as well, fuelling critical literatures about what participation means, how it can be more positively theorized and practiced in novel ways (Askins and Pain, 2011; Gerlach and Jellis, 2015; Kanngieser, 2012, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 1999). In particular, as Kanngieser (2013) saliently points out, the desire to generate more experimental approaches to participation not only takes experimental practices as objects of research, but also often as legitimate practices and methods for undertaking research itself (see also Askins and Pain, 2011; Gibson-Graham and Rolevink, 2009).

Such approaches call for a reappraisal of the politics of participation that is sensitive to the precarious space it inhabits. This does not displace the dark side of participation as much as *supplement* participation with a *potentiality* that subsists within the participatory encounter (Cahill, 2007; Kesby, 2007; Kindon et al., 2007). If such critical scholars recognize the contingency of participation's depoliticizing effects, then so too are its radical potentials precariously situated.

In this paper, we draw upon Felix Guattari's work on transversality to develop an understanding of participation that

does *not* build from a narrow conception of subjectivity which is constituted in deliberative terms of consensus-building (Habermas, 1984), or ongoing agonistic confrontations between different political identities (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985); but rather foregrounds more open and experimental *participatory assemblages*. Guattari's emphasis upon *experimental* engagement with affective relations that structure everyday life, and importantly the social, cultural and technical machines that mediate these relations, enables us to think the politics of participation in a way that is more sensitive to the precarious space it inhabits. Through an extended, theoretically oriented reflection on one author's experiences coordinating an experimental participatory project with Caribbean fisherfolk<sup>1</sup> in the 1990s and 2000s, we attempt to show that participation is lodged between affective, transversalizing relations that hold out the possibility for other ways of life, *and* the depoliticizing machines that structure these relations. In our reflection, the fisherfolk project's possibilities for an affirmative biopolitics emerged through, and were eventually suffocated by, the overcoded demands of neoliberalizing universities. With the term 'overcode', we are signalling how signifying chains of neoliberal governmental rationalities, structured around data, fundability, impact, solutions and other buzzwords, straitjacket the meaning and value of participatory work. Thus, while Guattari's more experimental approach helps us recognize the possibilities for an affirmative biopolitics, it also draws attention to under-appreciated dynamics that complicate and forestall experimental possibilities. It foregrounds the affective tensions, the complex 'pushes and pulls' that characterize what in this paper we call *participation as assemblage*.

In what follows, we do not present 'theory' followed by 'case study'. Rather, we progressively elaborate our theoretical moorings through a narrative reflection on the fisherfolk project's trajectory. Specifically, the paper is structured by three key concepts – *assemblage*, *transversality* and *ethico-aesthetics* – which usefully help us think through the dynamics of participatory research. Following this introduction, the second section introduces the project and explores the growing influence and limits of assemblage theory in geography and participatory research. The

third section engages the project's experimental aspects and suggests reconsidering the politics of assemblage through Guattari's work on *transversality*. The penultimate section deploys Guattari's (1992) concept of *ethico-aesthetics* to explore how the neoliberalizing university's machinic assemblages overcoded the fisherfolk project. The paper concludes with a discussion of how assemblage theory, spun through Guattari, can contribute to participatory research and geographic thought more broadly.

## **Assemblage**

In their seminal work, Cooke and Kothari (2001: 14) say that 'the fundamental concern' for participatory development debates over the past few decades has been how 'power and power relations' are theorized and experienced. The story of our own case study begins back in the 1980s and 1990s, before human geography widely engaged participatory research (IBG-RGS Participatory geographies Research Group, 2006; Kesby, 2007; Kindon et al, 2007; Kinpaishy, 2008), before our present interest in assemblage theory, and instead with debates about power and participation prevalent at that time. Here the question of an author's personal transformation cannot be disconnected from the standard detached and impersonal narrative surrounding the trajectory of debates over participatory research (Cahill, 2007; Kraftl et al., 2012). This is of course not to say that participatory debates constitute a narrow or single-track field for exploration (as illustrated in the breadth of contributions to such edited texts as Hickey and Mohan, 2004; or, more specifically for the Caribbean, in Pugh and Momsen, 2006; Pugh and Potter, 2003). Rather, we are concerned with how particular theories have weaved their way through our own personal histories of participatory development, something which has now brought us up to the present with what we will shortly turn to as a Guattarian spin on assemblage theory.

Back in the late 1980s and 1990s, a heated debate was taking place within critical planning traditions that spilled into other academic disciplines. This debate adopted a highly particular Foucauldian reading of power to critique Habermasian-inspired approaches to participatory planning (see, respectively, Flyvbjerg,

1998; Yiftachel, 1998; and Forester, 1988; Healey, 1996). Specifically, this critique called into question participation's benign claims to emancipate local populations, and instead foregrounded 'a link between power relations and the production of the "truth" by which we live' (Kothari, 2001: 145). Although with hindsight this mobilization of Foucault was quite narrow, at the time these critiques profoundly impacted one of the authors of this paper, who was then undertaking fieldwork for a PhD in human geography on Caribbean participatory planning. Observations of a participatory planning initiative for the redesign of a marine management area along the west coast of Barbados were revealing how processes of empowerment, facilitation and consensus-building (formulated via Habermas) were in practice disciplinary processes of normalization, surveillance, alienation and exclusion (aligned with the dominant Foucaultian critiques at this time). An international development consultancy was applying a 'toolkit' approach to participation that had the effects of supporting the interests of luxury hotel resorts, tourists and marine scientists while excluding and ostracizing fisherfolk in particular (Pugh, 2013a). Through this toolkit approach, which lasted between 1998 and 2000, empowerment became a vector of power relations that disciplined, acted upon, and alienated the community's most vulnerable members – precisely the dark side of participatory interventions later critiqued by Cooke and Kothari (2001). Reflective of more general trends in fisheries management outlined by St Martin (2007: 527), the opportunities for fishing communities in Barbados to experiment in new ways of working and living was closed-down as 'a particular neoclassical understanding of fisheries' worked its way into participatory development. This 'narrow theorization' brought to bear a 'rational economic' model that foregrounded 'the destructive effects' of fisherfolk communities and practices (St Martin, 2007). More generally these experiences of the participatory project demonstrated how '[t]he institutionalization of these essentially neoliberal practices in fisheries management has been described by many as a creeping enclosure of the fisheries commons' (St Martin, 2007: 527–528; see also St Martin, 2006).

By the end of this Caribbean project in the early 2000s, participatory development had seemingly reached an impasse

more generally in wider academic debates as well (Kesby, 2007; Pugh, 2005a). The Foucauldian critique of Habermasian optimism had by now been effective at highlighting what Kothari (2001: 140) called 'the forms of control and power articulated by participative approaches through the social interactions that take place'. As the new millennium dawned, and the PhD on Caribbean participatory planning drew to a close, it seemed like academic debate in particular was often riddled with anxiety about participation and exhausted of potentiality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, like many others at the time, this author became skeptical about participatory development and sought to stimulate more open, experimental and explorative approaches to participation (Kesby, 2007; St Martin, 2006).

Elsewhere, we have suggested *assemblage theory* as a useful way to think through these debates (Grove and Pugh, 2015). Here, our interest aligns with a general growing interest in assemblage across the discipline. Geographers have deployed the concept to understand dynamic, contextually specific and topologically pliant processes of becoming in fields as diverse as geopolitics (Dittmer, 2014), disaster resilience (Grove, 2013, 2014), international development (Gidwani, 2008), community forestry (Li, 2007) and translocal social movements (McFarlane, 2009), to name a few. What draws so many to assemblage is that the concept does not direct analytical attention to an overarching logic that determines how change occurs – whether this is Habermasian rationality, Marxian political economy, or (misplaced<sup>2</sup>) Foucauldian accounts of all-encompassing disciplinary apparatuses – but rather to contextually specific juxtapositions of materialities and enunciations that continually provoke new problems for thought and practice. In short, the approach we are interested in is fundamentally more experimental because assemblage emphasizes the topological qualities of extensive beings – that is, the subtle ways that identities, values and power relations can persist even as they change form and structure in response to these juxtapositions. In this sense, we have found assemblage a useful way to think through both the indeterminate *potentiality* for participatory research to challenge existing power relations but *also* the determinate possibility for participation to reinforce and



consolidate the status quo – the ‘pushes and pulls’ we noted earlier.

However, there is a problematic tendency in much work on assemblage to downplay power dynamics that circulate through assemblage. Indeed, as Anderson et al. (2012) detail, for many scholars following the lead of philosophers Manuel DeLanda or Bruno Latour (2004), assemblage simply signals a post-human ontology that de-centers the agential human subject. Perhaps the paramount example is Bennett’s (2010) influential deployment of assemblage to explore the distributed agency of non-human things. Bennett’s account of the 2003 blackout on the US East Coast highlights how the materialities of power infrastructure networks – decaying, lacking maintenance, densely coupled into complex regional utility networks – and the surrounding environments created conditions where a seemingly random event such as a tree falling on a power line could generate cascading effects that ‘produce’ a disruptive power outage. As Chandler (2014) argues, while this use of assemblage might offer a theoretically elegant post-humanist accounting of causality, it effectively blunts critical considerations of power or politics. This much is suggested by DeLanda (2006) himself, who asserts that assemblage is a philosophical category concerned with ontology, rather than politics. In this formulation, power becomes little more than the capacity to produce an effect in something else, and the practice of critique is reduced to tracing out causal linkages after the fact (Buchanan, 2015; Chandler, 2014).

Against this depoliticizing tendency, in this paper, we want to emphasize what Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987) identified as the *subjectivizing effects* of assemblage. Key here is that in their original formulation of the term, *assemblage is above all else about the social investment of desire*. Indeed, assemblages are explicitly constituted as *desiring machines* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983): they produce the collective machinic unconscious – and thus structure the field of possibility for subjective becomings – even as assemblages delimit the potential for how bodies might relate to one another.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, we take up Buchanan’s (2015) lead and foreground these subjectivizing dimensions of assemblage through



our own case study of participation as assemblage. A key point for us here is Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) elaboration of assemblage as a heterogeneous, contingent and ongoing processual (dis)alignment of affective relations and diagrammatic interventions. By *affect*, we mean a pre-individual capacity to affect and be affected. It can be productively thought as an intensive, relational and atmospheric force that surrounds extensive bodies and charges them with certain possibilities for becoming-otherwise while closing-down others. This latter point is key: while Deleuze and Guattari are often celebrated as theorists of deterritorialization, or the unmooring of subjective possibilities from territorialized assemblages that constrain meaning, identity and value, this should not be taken as an unbounded terrain of pure potentiality. As our case study will demonstrate, deterritorialization is always coupled with reterritorialization; affective potentials are always met with diagrammatic interventions that striate these indeterminate potentials into determinate possibilities (Deleuze, 1995b). *Diagrams* are incorporeal alignments of force relations – or relations between relations (Deleuze, 1988). As such, they are 'real without being actual': they align affective relations in particular ways that actualize specific types of bodies – individuals and collectives with certain capacities and desires (Massumi, 1992). Taken together, assemblage thus directs our attention to contingent, loosely coupled diagrammatic arrangements-in-(de)formation that create extensive bodies (individual and collective) that see, feel, think, desire and act in particular ways as *well as* the affective potential for these bodies to become other than they are – that is, to see, feel, think, desire and act in *different* ways. This latter point is key for our case of participation as assemblage, for it foregrounds how *assemblages are not only technical machines but are also social desiring machines* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983) that reconfigure the site of politics at the level of subjectivization. This point will become particularly evident later in our story when we consider participation and the overcoding forces of the neo-liberal University (The Analogue University, 2017). Indeed, the concept of assemblage as originally articulated by Deleuze and Guattari enabled them to also diagnose an ongoing transformation in global capitalist order and its increasing

reliance on what Suely Rolnik (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008: 10) describes as 'the central role it would assign to subjectivity turning the forces of desire, creation and action into a major source for the extraction of surplus value'.

In this light, we side with Chandler, Buchanan and others who caution that the celebration of post-humanist ontologies carries the risk of reducing critical scholarship to little more than tracing causal linkages after an event. To now develop this critique further through our case study, we want to suggest that the *subjectivizing dimensions of participatory assemblages* offer an opportunity to rethink questions of politics and power in assemblage theory. Participation offers a unique slant on this problem, precisely because critical scholars in the mid-2000s began to reconsider what constituted politics, power and ethics in participatory research. Rather than casting aside participation as merely another tool of the oppressive development industry, some scholars began to critically examine the ethical and political possibilities of the participatory encounter (Askins and Pain, 2011; Kanngieser, 2013; St Martin, 2001). As kinpaisby-hill (2011: 480, emphasis in original) remark, in this embodied, contextualized scene of being-together-with other humans and non-humans, participatory practice is very much about shared investments of desire, and is often marked by a 'shift to *emotion with*, rather than *emotion of* or *compassion for* those with whom we work'. Turning to our own study of participation as assemblage, these reflections also express for us what is at stake in the question of power and the subject in assemblage theory: how to account for the social production of desire, and the political possibilities this production opens and forecloses?

## **Transversality**

This interest in the social production of desire and political potentiality returns us back to our story of Caribbean participatory development. In 2003, an initiative paying Barbadian fisherfolk to explore the constraints and opportunities for their own fishing communities was successfully pitched to the British High Commission in Barbados by three fishers and the author who had

recently gained his PhD. Our central rationale was that fisherfolk across the Caribbean should be their own paid development consultants, rather than have others do the job on their behalf. As noted, previously fisherfolk had negative experiences of top-down, externally expert-driven participatory planning, and for the fisherfolk involved in our newly framed *experimental* project this concern was the sparking point for the generation of new desires, opportunities and possibilities.

The opening point of departure for our fisherfolk project was therefore this social desire for more experimental and ethical approaches to participation. This was grounded in both deep personal experiences of participation going wrong in the past, and in broader academic trends which increasingly sought to encourage more experimental approaches to participation (Kesby, 2007; Pugh, 2005a). The initial discussions that took place between the academic and fisherfolk entailed imagining new forms of expertise, and new formulations of the subject-position of the expert. A central concern for this imagining of new forms of authority was the adoption of an approach that fundamentally reconfigured the forms of authority between academic (or development expert more generally) and fisherfolk, and a key concern was that fisherfolk should lead and be their own paid development consultants. As Berkes (2009) documents, co-management between experts and fishers has not had a good track record in fisheries management; often narrowly focused upon adapting to the status quo and bioeconomics, rather than being driven by other desires of fisherpeople themselves. Just as worrying here is how fisheries co-management practices have increasingly drawn upon the powerful international donor discourse of 'resilience', and are thus framed in a reductive way to reduce fisherpeople's expectations of participation to 'learning to learn through uncertainty and environmental change, or learning to be adaptive' (Armitage et al., 2011: 995; Pugh, 2014). By contrast, our fisherfolk project was framed as a more open-ended and experimentally transformative approach. We wanted to directly challenge the prevailing trends noted, and instead open-up newly affective spaces of possibilities.

Funded by the British High Commission of Barbados, three fisherfolk from Barbados initially led the research, but, as we shortly explain, this was eventually expanded out to the involvement of 128 fisherpeople across seven Caribbean islands. What was particularly important was that the funds went directly to fisherfolk themselves. Normally neo-liberal demands and historical legacies of colonialism mean that they go to the University or development consultant analyst. But we wanted to make the demonstrative case that, particularly given the legacies of colonialism and continued hierarchies of participatory development in the Caribbean, it is the disenfranchised that should be their own development consultants – especially if the aim is the generation of new forms of authority-expertise and sociality.

Such concerns further express how we conceptualize participation as assemblage; for in the case of the fisherfolk project the experimental and subjective refrains that challenged the way development industry is run both registered and signalled the disturbance of a long history of empire, colonialism, modernity and development, whilst at the same time seeking to generate new rhythms of sensibility. Indeed, these precise concerns were further brought out positively during the earliest days of the findings of the fisherfolk project itself when the Barbados' fisherfolk report was produced (Hinds et al., 2004). This report interestingly observed the formal geo-political dominance of the capital, Bridgetown, but strong evidence for a much more decentralized and informal fishing industry which operates across Barbados; and, in particular, strong support for Sixmens fishing community, one of the most productive but neglected fishing communities in Barbados (Hinds et al., 2004). Key here was how fisherfolk themselves observed that whereas the Bridgetown fisheries market is subjected to and regimented by the mechanized urban clock, Sixmens meets when the community dictates. Henke (2004: 41) says that in the Caribbean urban capitalism's clock time has stood 'for a moral order that put a premium on the individual rather than on the community as a whole'; and, therefore, key to imposing ownership over labour, bodies, and existence. Then contrasted with Bridgetown, Sixmen's fishing community was found by fisherfolk to resist this ascetic rationalism of Barbadian

capitalism. Yet, as the fisherfolk' report also found, it is in fact Sixmens, and not Bridgetown, that is more reflective of fishing community practices across the island more generally. Many communities identified with Sixmens particularly and how its practices were downplayed by oppressive narratives. Through this report, Sixmen's was then re-characterized by Barbados's leading newspaper – the *Daily Nation* – as the 'backbone of fishing industry' (Smith, 2003: 40). Indeed, Barbadian community figures such as the influential calypsonian 'The Mighty Gabby' went on to say that Sixmen's became a fundamental site of contestation more generally over what it means to be 'Barbadian'.

Such findings remind us once again of the use of framing participation as assemblage. First, thinking about the fisherfolk project in terms of assemblage directs us towards the possibilities for new sites of politics: those contextually-specific, transversalizing, affective relations that permeate assemblages and create desires, refrains and new capacities (in our case, a social desire to radically challenge how development consultancy and the development industry are traditionally managed, and to generate more experimental refrains instead). Second, framing the project in terms of Guattarian assemblage theory also points to the diagrams of power that attempt to direct these affective relations and desires and channel the potential of bodies coming together towards certain outcomes rather than others (in our case, the project demonstrated how certain legacies of colonialism and development weighed heavily upon us, influencing both our radical aims for the project itself, *and* important findings such as those contained in the Barbados fisherfolk report just discussed). Taken together then, the project was revealed to be permeated by conflicting relations that can de- and re-territorialize desires, institutions, knowledges and so forth, but *also* in ways that can generate new subjective possibilities and authority-expertise relations.

Yet, even as both the project's operation and findings challenged existing structures, we do not feel comfortable with the idea that this case study should be too straightforwardly constituted as a 'resistance campaign' (Routledge, 1996: 409) or social 'movement' (Routledge et al., 2007: 2575). This would be to

suggest that a coherent counterhegemonic chain of equivalence actually exists to challenge prevailing orders (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). We are more comfortable thinking about this project in Guattari's *experimental* and *creative* terms, and our particular hope for the project was that, as Kesby (2007: 2820) says, 'strange behaviour in one place (the participatory arena) can lead to a questioning about what constitutes normal relations' elsewhere. Indeed, when they finished in Barbados and produced their report, the three fisherfolk physically got on planes themselves, and the project was rolled out to seven countries and employed 128 fisherfolk over a two-year period; with funding from British High Commissions for St. Lucia, Antigua, St. Kitts, Dominica, St. Vincent, and Carriacou. Making Caribbean fisherfolk their own paid consultants in these different islands as well became a selling point for High Commissions who are keen to placate the local population that often see donor funds travelling elsewhere (see also Pugh, 2005b; Pugh and Richardson, 2005). With further support from unpaid Caribbean consultants, and a personal donation from respected North American Caribbeanist Janet Momsen, the rationale for the project gained momentum. At the launch of the initiative, covered by Caribbean television, radio, and newspapers, we reaffirmed the central goal of the project:

The important difference between this and previous programs of its type, is that fisherfolk will be studying and training other fisherfolk: no British, Canadian, or American development consultants are flying down to do a report. Such reports, as we all know, often cost considerable amounts of money, remain on dusty old shelves, while fisherpeople are not heard. (Hinds et al., 2004)

In spanning seven islands the project went on to develop archipelagic concerns and explicitly *spatial* perspectives, so that fishers explored and documented the nature of different fishing communities within and between islands as well, their connective networks, or otherwise. In her review of the project Rachel Pain (2004: 254) explored how it demonstrated the need for 'successful projects that work across scales', so that the disconnected can

chart and create new geographies of power. As we have explained, this scaled up approach crossed many different types of borders (academic, territorial, social, etc), (re)configuring desire and potentialities so that the project was funded by government agencies, local businesses and other Caribbean academics wanting to challenge the development industry.

Having documented some of these practical goals and concerns of the project, we are now in a better position to add further theoretical depth to our analysis by drawing upon Felix Guattari's concept of *transversality* to augment our particular interest in participation as assemblage. Transversality was a forerunner to Deleuze and Guattari's later specification of assemblage theory, and a key conceptual foundation in Guattari's own schizoanalytic psychiatric method. Through his elaboration of schizoanalysis, Guattari advanced an understanding of subjectivity as a collective, affective (or more precisely, transversalizing) and future-oriented dynamic, which we argue has important implications for thinking participation as assemblage. Guattari developed his understanding of schizoanalysis through his work at his mentor Jean Oury's La Borde Clinic in France. In brief, schizoanalysis sought to problematize the Freudian idea of *transference* that held pride of place in psychoanalytic treatment. Freudian psychoanalysis is based on an understanding of subjectivity that asserts that our desires, thoughts, and feelings reflect repressed emotions. This is an understanding that is focused on the past and hidden origins of subjectivity. Transference is the means for uncovering this origin in treatment: through the transference, the analyst becomes the object of the patient's desire, which makes desire visible for reflection, inspection, and ultimately cure. In Guattari's (2015) reading, there are two problems with this Freudian concept. First, it is past-oriented: it locates the origin of subjectivity in repressed emotions that shape our desire in unconscious ways. Second, it demands that the patient articulate their desire in the language of the analyst. This is a cardinal sin for Guattari, because it institutionalizes a Hegelian master-slave relationship: the slave can only come to understand themselves and their world through the language of the master – in this case, the Freudian psychoanalyst. In the transference, language operates in a manner



that is antithetical to artistic and more experimental practice: rather than facilitating the formation of new desires and identities out of new sensorial experiences, language straightjackets the patient within the semiological hierarchy of Freudian psychoanalysis, which in turn cements rather than destabilizes capitalist forms of subjectivity and their institutional supports.

What could be more important than this for our own fisherfolk project! As we have stated, the whole rationale of this project was to challenge the model of top-down international development consultant as the therapist and analyst who gathers different stakeholders together and ‘reveals’ what is needed. We instead wanted to open up and explore other possibilities, desires, identities, and so forth – the same transversalizing play Guattari identified. At stake in Guattari’s critique of transference is the possibility for such alternative, ‘artistic’ forms that allow language and subjectivity to arise *out of* new experiences, desires and relations. His schizoanalytic method sought to destabilize the rigid semiological system of explanatory categories on which capitalist subjectivity rests, such as Oedipus, Lack, Signifier and Father. Instead, schizoanalysis develops an understanding of subjectivity as a collective, group phenomena shaped by the context or environment in which people and things interact. The subject here is a topological figure, at once inside and outside the affective relations that make up a milieu. There is no universal model of subjectivity based in language or a universalizing structure (which is why Guattari is not only appealing for us, but for other Caribbeanists too, like Glissant, 1997; see Pugh, 2013b, 2016). Instead, subjectivity is polyvocal and polydimensional. For Guattari, subjects emerge as they affect and are affected by their surroundings and the social, technical and cultural machines that mediate these transversalizing relations and condition how they sense, feel, desire, act and react. This is why it was so important for us that fisherfolk became their own development consultants, reconfiguring authority–expertise, physically leaving their communities and travelling to others; to talk, socialize and open-up new conversations and possibilities. Traditionally, fisherfolk have not only remained on their island, but also within their own fishing communities, mediated by ‘middle-men’, government agencies, or

more recently international development consultants working upon their behalf. Challenging this, Guattarian transversality is a good way of framing the aims of the fisherfolk project. Our central interest was in how social, technical and cultural machines delimit, but can also be challenged through fisherfolk leading development consultancy themselves – literally leaving their fishing communities and travelling to other islands, generating new forms of authority, expertise, sociality and affective experiences.

In this way Guattari's concept of *transversality* can be roughly thought as analogous to affective relations, but, as in the fisherfolk project, Guattari uses transversality to focus on the micro-political dynamics of subject formation that are always potentially in play within any assemblage. As Genosko (2002: 96, 104) writes, transversality is 'an element of militant practice that aims at a rupture with inherited modes of organization;' it gestures towards the way that affective relations always *potentially* open out onto a micro-politics of 'militant, social, responsive creativity'. As we have noted, we are similarly concerned that this reading of assemblage should not be confused with a crude, organicist vitalism that naively positions life before power. Instead, the de-structuring potentialities of transversality associated with the fisherfolk project are in the various machines – technical, physical, social and cultural – that mediate these affective relations and shape collective desire and subjectivity.

### **Participation in the neoliberal university**

What we want to emphasize here is that foregrounding the subjectivizing and micropolitical dimensions of assemblage through the concept of transversality, as we have just done, is about maintaining the potency of the concept of assemblage itself; and key to understanding how '[p]olitical action needs to be conceived first of all as a shift in the social investments of desire' (Berardi, 2009: 139). This is, of course, a point that critical scholars have recognized in various ways: for Roelvink et al. (2015: 10–11) '[t]he mobilization and transformation of desires and the making of new identifications' is central to any collective political project. Similarly, Richa Nagar's work within the Sangatin women's

collective (Nagar and Ali, 2003: 65) also foregrounds collective investments of desire 'to highlight strategies that are available for producing new collative geographies; for exploring the ways in which these geographies are/can be simultaneously embedded in and speak to multiple sites and landscape of struggle and survival; and for imagining the processes by which we might begin to re-evaluate and reclaim previously appropriated knowledges'. But Guattari's thought helps us explicitly situate these transversalizing potentialities in relation to more reactionary counter-forces and, in particular, the overcoding role of social and cultural machines.

As noted, a central rationale was that the Caribbean fisherfolk should become their own development consultants. The purpose was to push as far away as possible – transversalizing – from the traditional model of the international development consultant as therapist and analyst on behalf of others. In this sense, paying fisherpeople to be their own consultants went much further than even the most scathing criticisms of the international development industry to date by Cooke (2004: 94) who says:

Of course, one way to achieve a more equal relationship between local and international consultants would be for them to be paid the same. But they rarely are; the local consultant, without whom the intervention often cannot happen, and who is often capable of doing the work alone, gets paid 'local rates' (less); the international consultant, often incapable of doing the work without a local counterpart, gets paid 'international rates' (more). The unfairness of this will be evident to all involved in an intervention, as will the hypocrisy of change agents who claim to be working to end poverty but whose weekly per-diem expenses, never mind their fees, often amount to more than average annual per capita incomes...[This] is a serious problem at the heart of participatory development; many of its practitioners have to do it to make a living, and there are organizations, many of them businesses sheltering behind an academic facade, which rely on the income from participatory development consultancies

to survive...‘we all know’ that this happens; but it is never acknowledged.

Yet, in paying fisherfolk directly, the fisherfolk project went even further than even this often quoted critique of how the development industry works. Given that the purpose was to reconfigure power at a range of scalar levels, we wanted fisherfolk themselves to become development consultants, and not others (local, international or otherwise). Thus, the funding largely skipped all traditional levels of expertise (someone was briefly employed to help the fisherfolk write the reports) and went straight to fisherfolk as a way of experimentally transversalizing authority and hierarchical power relations. Such ethical concerns also respond to the growing criticism academics have received in recent years from many communities involved in participation and scholarly activism. Indeed, some academics have been brutally honest about the levels of criticism they have received; as when the *Autonomous Geographies Collective* (Chatterton et al., 2010: 251) reported the hostile attitude of one local activist to their participatory research in the UK:

...I am afraid that I am uncomfortable with this situation. Firstly, with the idea of people capitalising on my unpaid activity for their own career development. Secondly, the creation of a class of highly paid activist/intellectuals who [are] mobile, powerful and following academic agendas. Thirdly, it is my experience that due to the level of commitment such people devote to their professional work, they are often less able to do the ‘grunt work’ required.

Such stark criticisms are now relatively commonplace in the participatory literature. For a while we felt that the fisherfolk project went some way to addressing them. Yet, as the fisherfolk project continued over the years, a problematic issue that emerged was the growing constraints and depotentializing pressures that neoliberal and data management strategies not only placed on the academic involved, but, importantly, the wider project itself – and therefore the possibilities for ethical and in-depth participatory

work. As we now turn to explore the gradual breakdown of the fisherfolk project, we explain how such concerns once again play to Guattari's interest in the subjectivizing effects of assemblages and the importance of social investments of desire.

In recent years, a substantial body of literature has emerged that documents how academic performance metrics of income generation, publications, funding councils, citations, H-Index and so forth, colonize academics' labour time and work against 'long-term, collective political work' (Burrows, 2012; Chatterton et al., 2010: 251; kinpaisby-hill, 2011; Mountz et al, 2015; Strathern, 2000; The Analogue University, 2017). As Guattari (1996: 133) says, in educational establishments across North America and Europe there is a fundamental need to interrogate 'the paralysing effects' of such neoliberal practices and how subjectivation 'is overshadowed in rationalist, capitalistic subjectivity which tends to systematically circumvent it'. Indeed, a growing body of critical literature today aligns feelings of inertia, fatigue and impotence in academia with how 'the ascendancy of neoliberal globalization has increasingly shut down the spaces for scholar activism' (Chatterton et al., 2010: 246; Pain et al., 2011).

As the years passed, something about this effort to 'index', 'demonstrate' and 'collectivise' the position of 'participatory expert' into new configurations delimited the more experimental possibilities for transversality and polyvocality central to the fisherfolk project. The subjectivation of not only the academic, but also more widely the project itself, hindered efforts to generate a collective, affective, transversalizing, and future-oriented dynamic of expertise. As time passed, the project felt increasingly exhausted and fatigued, under pressure from these and many other quarters. From the academic's perspectives, having various postdoc positions, rather than a lectureship and its bureaucratic constraints, initially meant significant time could be devoted to the project. But as the pressures of lectureships took hold, only finding a half day a week here and there in an increasingly busy timetable meant it became more difficult to get meaningfully involved. However, we will not dwell on this particular issue too much. For it can always be argued that if a project had more time, played the funding game better, was smaller in ambitions, had a more

coherent sense of direction, kept up levels of enthusiasm, and so forth, then it will be successful. It is obvious that for some projects success can be significant if only a half dozen people are involved, or the timescale is short, whilst for others, working in different settings and addressing different problems, this will not be enough. Moreover, if participatory debate over the past few decades demonstrates anything, it is that we can always find examples to prove participation is a tyranny, and others to prove it is not. Indeed, it is this somewhat circular debate that has now drawn us more toward thinking about participation as an assemblage; *because couching assemblage theory in terms of transversality focuses upon how the desires and emotive concerns that drive participatory research become overcoded and close-down potentiality in a given setting.* Here we see assemblage theory as a diagnostic tool, enabling us to explore the thresholds and potentialities of participation; how they increase, decrease or otherwise.

In his important essay, 'Postscript on Control Societies', Deleuze (1995a) diagnoses the emergence of what he calls *control societies*. Here we argue that the emergence of what could be called the 'data university' is the latest manifestation of such control societies (The Analogue University, 2017). Rather than organized through disciplinary techniques of individualization and regulation, for Deleuze control societies such as the contemporary University are characterized by the disaggregation of individuals into 'dividuals', discrete data points that can be (dis)aggregated and modulated in any number of ways. While Deleuze may offer too decisive a break between these social forms (Galloway, 2014), for us the important take home point is that control takes place through the mechanism of digital coding. Everyday life within the university is today subjected to the 'green light' of 'blue chip' (higher rated) funding sources, high 'impact journals', 'time-management charts', 'promotion criteria', 'University impact case studies', 'student feedback metrics', 'academia.edu' hits, twitter shares and many other data streams. Burrows (2012: 357) says that this rise of auditing metrics has had affective qualities; the reduction of things to '*number and numbers*' is generative of new 'structures of feeling' across the university that goes beyond

specifics (see also Dodge and Kitchin, 2005). Digital synthesizers are integral to the functioning of such control societies as their operation passes through codification, homogenization and the binarization of data, in a way that is both additive and formative. Indeed, *data coding has become the new exchange value* for many working at contemporary Universities in the Global North at least, and productive of new subjectivities and freedoms.

Such concerns found their way into the fisherfolk project. As the project developed during the 2000s, from the academic's side, his university employer not only asked how much money the project was generating for the university but also how we could data code its 'impact' when it was not being fully funded by the 'blue chip' funding stream of a Research Council? Were impressive websites being established? Would this project be an 'impact case study'; and if not, is it 'worth' investing time in it, or, perhaps better, strategically reinvesting in writing papers to meet other league table metrics? Fisherfolk too were often physically exhausted from travelling between different islands to spend the funding before expenses were shut off, whilst at the same time trying to maintain a family and fishing life of their own. Many fisherfolk found it difficult to psychologically get to grips with this bizarre funding logic that emphasized the importance of spending money quickly to meet some target or other, when surely it made more sense to be frugal and save money for another day, as much more work needed doing in future as well. Moreover, just as academics find the bureaucratic burdens of grant writing and reporting increasingly onerous, so did the fisherfolk who, as the driving force, were fully involved in this process. From the academic's perspective too, serious moral choices then had to be made as the project came to an end: should he reduce the project in a way that generated income for the university rather than fisherfolk (despite its clear rationale and intentions)? Given the desire to challenge traditions a decision was made not to; but, as a result, the academic lost his job and had to look for work elsewhere. Although another university then employed him, by this time the collective participatory assemblage of the fisherfolk project had already hardened, and, for many involved, resulted in exhaustion and fatigue. For sure, this happened precisely because of the



stubbornness of many involved and how we wanted things on our own idealistic terms rather than to follow the data streams of others. But as we said earlier, that was precisely the ethical point of the project itself; to drive a 'wedge' between 'participation' and the 'development' goals of other agencies (Cooke, 2004: 54), now increasingly reconfigured in terms of ever-proliferating digital metrics.

Once again, here the project very much aligns with Guattari and the final conceptual term we want to introduce into this paper: *ethico-aesthetics*. When Guattari (1992: 10) reflected upon his career at La Borde, he said that 'my perspective involves shifting the human and social sciences from scientific paradigms toward ethico-aesthetic paradigms'. He surmised that ethico-aesthetic paradigms have two key characteristics: they direct analytical attention (1) toward artistic creation, the production of refrains, tunings and (constant) readjustments to chaos and (2) to how this sensibility is always in danger of being captured and modelled by machines and diagrams (the intrusion of societal legacies such as Freudian psychoanalysis, long-established development regimes, neo-liberal codings, the recent rise of the data university, etc). Here, Guattari's use of the term *art* does not refer to 'Art as institution' (which he says is completely subsumed under the plane of the real – i.e. Capitalism), but rather a burgeoning range of creative and experimental techniques that open the self to new sensations, and thus the potentiality of becoming-otherwise (see also Kanngieser, 2013; McCormack, 2008). As we have explained, this was precisely how we thought about the fisherfolk project in such ethico-aesthetic terms; because it (1) signals the affective relations that 'comprise' assemblages and (2) signals the diagrammatic interventions that structure these affective relations, respectively. Indeed, when we now bring the three key conceptual terms of this paper together – *ethico-aesthetics*, *assemblage* and *transversality* – we see how the concept of transversality foregrounds how affective, transversalizing relations have become the locus of struggle in late capitalism, for it was precisely on this terrain that the subjective possibilities of the fisherfolk project were produced, constrained and appropriated (Deleuze, 1995a).

For us this is the value of Guattari's original elaboration of assemblage theory as it enables us to conceptualize these two movements at once: participation is a precarious and unsteady transversalizing movement of depoliticizing tendencies; whilst, at the same time, a process of subjective 'enslavement' within the machines of late capitalist order. On the one hand, given the success of participatory critiques of top-down development programming in the 1970s and 1980s, participation is now firmly entrenched within development and scholarship. There is both an ethical desire and pressure to do participatory work, so that today 'participation' is often the first step into 'best practice' in both academia and the donor world. Against this backdrop, the problem of the fisherfolk project was precisely to experiment with participation and develop a more ethico-aesthetic paradigm; to explore where doing participation differently might (or might not) lead. But, on the other hand, just as we noted that neoliberal pressures can erode the transversalizing potential of such projects, so too did our own uncompromising ethical stance against these neoliberalizing tendencies as well (The Analogue University, 2017). Our uncompromising stance meant that we were unable to reason a way back to "exploit the few remaining 'cracks'" in the neo-liberal University and associated regimes (Russell, 2015: 6). Instead, we collectively opted for non-cooperation and the project was brought to an end. Any flirtation with the philosophical tradition of pragmatism was rejected by adherence to the strong ethical positions that we adopted. As Deleuze (quoted in Galloway, 2014: 105) says, sometimes the only answer to the fatigue brought about by one's own firmly held ethical stances is to generate 'vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control'. Then in the fisherfolk project the collective hardening of the assemblage came both in terms of neoliberal demands to meet various performance metrics, and from our own strong ethical commitment to a non-neoliberal way.

## **Conclusion: Towards participation as an ethico-aesthetic assemblage**

Like many others today, we believe that Guattari's writing 'harbours rich models for political and theoretical practice' (Woodward, 2015: 162) and demonstrates that 'model making also generates new openings' (Fannin, 2015: 173). Through charting the long history of a participatory case study from the 1990s until the present day, in this paper Guattari's work has specifically enabled us to conceptualize *participation as assemblage*. First, participation as assemblage directs attention to a new site of politics: the contextually-specific, transversalizing, artistic, affective relations that permeate assemblages and create desires, refrains and capacities (such as desires for better participation, to challenge expertise and authority regimes, generate new income streams, expose different ways of life or reduced suffering). Second, it also points to diagrams of power that attempt to direct these affective relations and channel the transversaling potential of bodies coming together towards certain outcomes rather than others. Taken together, we thus have a specific vision of politics situated across social investments of desire that sustain the potential to become-otherwise. This vision foregrounds how, as an assemblage, participation involves a variety of techniques that can de- and re-territorialize desires, people, institutions, knowledge, non-human things and so forth in ways that can generate new subjective possibilities – but it can just as easily erode this transversalizing potential and instead reinforce the status quo.

The case study presented in this paper can be situated within a much wider and important contemporary movement to engage in more artistic approaches to participatory research and practice. But on the other hand, universities, development agencies and other institutions increasingly deploy technologies such as metrics, data technology and league tables to capture, re-work and over-code this desire to be more experimental (The Analogue University, 2017). In Guattarian terms, these devices foreclose a novel *ethico-aesthetic paradigm*. As a number of scholars have shown, these new forms of regulation open new paths for resistance. Feminist scholars have been at the forefront of these debates. For example, Mountz et al. (2015) document possible

responses, from slowing down and taking the time to read primary texts in detail, to how the digital (e.g. email, iphone) and university metrics change work–life balance and generate the idea of (un)productive labour. Rachel Pain et al. (2011), Kinpaisby (2008) and Pickerill (2014) similarly emphasize the timescale factor of participatory research, because whilst matters often feel urgent, as in the case of the fisherfolk project, dealing with them can and should often take time. From this perspective, the slow university, third space (Routledge, 1996) and communiversity movements (Kinpaisby, 2008) all become attempts to rescue the university from itself; to assert that, in a world of new openings and nefarious control apparatus, history is not over because the university is being reduced to its own consummation. Such work points to how new educational and activist environments are needed where ‘new investments of desire become possible, which will be autonomous from competition, acquisition, possession, and accumulation’ (Berardi, 2009: 140). In an important sense, this also means drawing attention to the failures, as in the honest work of the *Autonomous Geographies Collective* noted above (Chatterton et al., 2010); or, at other times, engaging in non-cooperation, as we ended up doing in the fisherfolk project documented in this paper.

From this case study, three key characteristics of thinking through *participation as assemblage* have come to the fore (although of course different case studies will raise others): (1) a distinct ethical interest in the affective capacities and relations of assemblages, and the possible generation of artistic refrains that challenge oppressive structures through collective participation (aligning with Askins and Pain, 2011; Kanngieser, 2013); (2) a particularly strong interest in the role of technical, social and desiring machines in participation and associated questions of transversality and ethico-aesthetics (aligning with Berardi, 2009; Gerlach and Jellis, 2015) and (3) an interest in the social investments of desire and associated neurotic hardenings that cause fatigue during participation and erode potentiality (aligning with Berardi, 2009; Guattari, 1992; Lazzarato, 2014; The Analogue University, 2017).

But perhaps most importantly for those working in many contemporary university settings, turning to Guattari to think

through participation as assemblage draws out how the neoliberalizing university facilitates, capacitates *and* erodes participation's transversalizing potentialities – positively, along overcoding vectors of digitized control, *and* negatively, as an overcoded target-object of radical scholars' critiques. Any attempts to further a radical politics of participation will have to engage with this question of how ethics itself is generated and maintained in participation assemblages *and* manifests through social investments of desire – something which may harden, generate neurosis, fatigue, exhaust possibilities or otherwise. Guattari's thought provides a powerful and underutilized vehicle for recognizing and transgressing this challenge.

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### **Notes**

1. Fisherfolk is the term for fisherpeople employed across much of the Caribbean.
2. As Collier (2009) emphasizes, Foucault's own analytical approach, especially after the mid-1970s, is considerably more sensitive to both contextual specificity and the topological reconfigurations of techniques and rationalities of power than

much work parading under the banner of 'Foucauldian' recognizes.

3. Deleuze and Guattari use the term 'machinic' in a very particular way. As Deleuze notes in a transcribed (and translated) roundtable shortly after the publication of *Anti-Oedipus* (where the concept of desiring-machine provides an early version of assemblage), 'we've given the notion of machine its maximum extension: in relation to flows. We define the machine as any system that interrupts flows' (Deleuze, 2004: 219). Taken in this light, the term machine – which is usually taken to signify rigid structure, stability and repetition – names the essential function of assemblage: the process of contingently interrupting "flows" of pre-individual affective relations and aligning them in unstable arrangements that are always on the verge of decomposition.

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